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"And what rough beast its hour come round at last . . ."—*William Butler Yeats*

## CHIMERA

A LITERARY QUARTERLY

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### EDITORS

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XIMENA DE ANGULO

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# Three Poems

*by Barbara Deming*



## I

BERGSON: "The piling up of the past upon the past goes on without relaxation . . . In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant. . . . We are dragging (it) behind us unawares."

This

pile on my back, this ageing rider, this  
I, cluck and whoa, makes mock of me,  
ride a cock horse. When I'd  
bolt I remember circus caricature:  
clown with skeleton after  
takes to his heels, and  
wherever he goes, it follows, for  
it's affixed to him; his  
flight but excites the bones,  
shakes up a deathly dance.

But

I'll not play your trotter to the grave,  
old hump, poisonous one,  
man of the sea; I mean to have you  
answer to me one day.  
You may, under my grappling hands,  
play through your changes,  
beast to beast to beast to beast,  
grimace wrinkling  
backward into grimace;  
I'll see the succession out—

For when there  
clears at last before my squinted eyes your docile  
smaller image—original guise—  
old enemy, you'll answer what I ask:  
where lies my liberty.

## II STILL LIFE

Ovid tells of love-compelled ones  
Who at the end of love's race  
In place of their charmers embrace  
Laurel tree or mulberry  
And there go round it miserably.

*I am one of these  
Out of "Metamorphoses"!*

Three stills give back this history, and mine.  
As first—middle of the woods the setting:  
One brought to a full stop by love of the stranger  
As he alarms her, bathing.  
She is caught in the act of stepping out of the water,  
Freezes, foot in air,  
And for this arrested moment they stare head-on.  
Full glare.  
See how he is impaled.  
He has trespassed, with a step, with a glance,  
In upon a mystery, in upon privacy.  
In this moment before you  
Pouting Cupid has him with the arrow.

*I am one of these—  
Saucer-eyed stormer of mysteries.*



He follows her as though she were his soul escaping.  
See him, caught up in that posture, flailing, awry,  
Limbs reaching out, the head thrust too far forward,  
Hair streaming back, limbs dreaming as they fly, and  
afame.

Transfixed in air, he is spent upon that element,  
Burns there.

*I am one of these—  
Borne where the arrow please.*

Last,  
See him with his fists full of snatched green  
Stare at the trembling bush.  
The shiny screen of flat petals  
Trembles but gives no place.  
Petals, fall apart! Bole and branches, split!  
And Love, come out, come out!  
His mouth is open as if to utter one interminable note.  
Who is she?  
I am my beloved. Now I cry: Who am I?

*I am one of these  
Without identities.*

# III

"Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live."

—NUMBERS 21.

Flies up at my feet  
A serpent swarm  
The sharp-toothed  
Days of my youth.  
Under hail of hissing  
Of venom-kissing  
Mouths, I lay me down to sleep.

But would arise.

O rear before my eyes  
The decisive spectre.  
The harsh worm,  
Sign of my days,  
Is raised to a power:  
In its gaze  
I burn  
And wake.

Strike, fiery fact,

If I should try to turn;  
Exact the long look  
Or grow stern: your rattling  
Entire burden unwind  
And break into this sleep; infract  
What else remains deadly  
Intact.

## Three Greek Myths in Palladian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

*by Marguerite Yourcenar*



THE HISTORY of the Ariadne myth is more complex than that of the myth of Alcestis, less integrated, but easier to trace through its successive strata of local traditions and legends. Possibly it can never be crystallized within a single masterpiece. The original conception of Ariadne not as the daughter of Minos but as his wife, not as sister of the Minotaur but as his priestess, not as princess but as bee-goddess, a bare-breasted figure clad in heavy flounces, all this was buried in the pre-historic ruins of Cnossus, to be revived only in the twentieth century by efforts of archaeologists. The Ariadne of whom Homer catches a glimpse is a beautiful girl with dark tresses, famed for those dances which are still done to the flute in present-day Crete. The intensely romantic myth of the abandoned maiden takes form much later on, in the Alexandrine period, when feminine charm is exploited to the full.

As a curious example of subterranean survival, this myth, rich in pre-Greek elements, comes to light again only after the great classical period of Greece has passed and the influx of Asiatic cults sweeps in. Ariadne appears as the abandoned lover whose grief takes on mystical significance and gradually makes of her the chief Dionysiac symbol, image of the soul purified by suffering and consoled by God. It is from this period that the statues inspired by Scopas come down to us in such profusion, Ariadnes swooning on their beds, expiring beauties around whose arms the forgers of the Renaissance had only to twine aspics to change the

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1. This is the final section of a preface to a volume of three new plays on classical Greek themes.



figures to Cleopatras. Catullus' Ariadne, close in spirit to Greek and Asiatic sensibility, springs from this impassioned tradition.

The type continues towards degradation with the mannerists and satirists of the Roman era, for whom the Dionysiac ecstasy has become a drunken revel. The Medieval period characteristically focuses Ariadne's story on its favorite theme of the abandoned damsel: an imprudent maiden of the Greek Isles, white and slender as a taper, signals with her kerchief to the Crusader re-embarking, while Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur, becomes the counterpart of St. George. By the time of the Renaissance, this theme, worn somewhat thin on minstrel harps, is advanced to the violins, and the figure of an immortal Ariadne is forever fixed in a fragmentary score of Monteverde, a pure and tragic being, like an Antigone of love:

E che volete  
Che mi conforte  
In così dura sorte,  
In così gran martire?  
Lasciate mi morire!

Ariane, ma soeur, de quel amour blessée  
Vous meurûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!

Eternal lament of the Ariadne of Monteverde or Racine, Ariadne of Titian trapped in the burning shades of a Bacchanale, star-crowned Ariadne of Tintoretto: these are the four heights which the myth has attained. "Ariane, ma soeur..." With Racine the center of interest has already changed; Ariadne is no more than the sister of Phedra. From 1677 on, for French poetry at least, the adventure of Crete and of Naxos becomes a mere prelude to the tragedy of Troezen, a first experience of love in Phedra's memory, and her first crime. For our contemporary taste, the center of interest changes again; the elder sister of Phedra is chiefly of interest as the young sister of the Minotaur; the Labyrinth, to a Picasso or a Dali, echoes with the howling of Pasiphae rather than to the plaint of Ariadne. The prehistoric bestiary, from which Racine allowed himself to take but a single sea-monster (and that one cost him bitter reproach), now reinvests

the tragic stage, and becomes for the twentieth-century psychologist the most adequate symbol of passion. From the sacred sensuality of ancient Crete to the romantic lovers of the Alexandrines; from Greek romanticism to the courtly love of the Middle Ages; from medieval minstrels languishing over deceived lovers to the poet of passion fully aware of its force and its shame; from passion and grief disciplined by examination of conscience to the primitive bestialities of the subconscious and the nightmare; thus the cycle is rounded to a close for the family of Minos, a downward curve in the values of love.

This much being said for the history of the myth, what can a poet of the 1940's make out of this Cretan bullfight? First, to go from the simpler to the more complex, we shall have the legendary equivalent of all those sisters who, like the Juliette and Alissa of Gide, are paired together, a double Hermes in feminine form, making up the total image of love. In their respective guises, Vice and Virtue, Sacred and Profane Love, the draped figure and the golden nude, they force the hero to make a choice. The second consideration is that since the true tragedy for Phedra is to break only ten years later, we are obliged here to keep to the tonality of morning light, laden with threat of storm, rather than enter the high noon of passion. Theseus is the first love of Phedra but, even while she is persuading herself that he will be the only one, *we* know that she is deceiving herself, and accordingly we cannot accept as final her first delight and her first treachery. In portraying her as more hard than tender, more passionate than loving, the attempt is to keep her almost intact for the tears and outcries of her supreme love. A kind of poetic justice demands that this woman who is to die of the indifference of Hippolytus be portrayed here as a callow girl; moral sensibility will come to Phedra with the temptation to incest itself.

Theseus is the first and only man that Ariadne will love; thereafter she will turn towards God. But this unique affection, her necessary error and humble trial of mortal dress before the putting on of starry crown and panther vestments, inspires no tragic pity, for already Bacchus can be seen, in the clear light of



autumnal evening, advancing toward this future Queen of Heaven. Nor can she be treated as a purely romantic heroine, destined as she is for mystic union.

As to Theseus, he comes down to us clad in less appealing though more varied guises than those of the two women. Companion of Hercules in the primeval forest, violator of the child Helen, suave bridegroom of the Amazonian Queen, accepting with equal ease the grotesqueries of Bottom and Quince and the witcheries of *Midsummer Night*. Warrior less noble than Achilles, seducer less competent than Don Juan, wicked son whose thoughts of parricide are less tragic than Oedipus' unwished-for crime, it is not until later than the time of this play that added years, his betrayal by Phedra, the death of his son, crimes committed by him and against him, cares of state in place of mere excitement of adventure, will combine to make of him the wise, almost saintly king of Sophocles' final play, sufficiently versed in the inevitable miseries of mankind to welcome within his gates the aged and outcast Oedipus.

Thus the present Theseus, of thirty-four years of age, retains those weaknesses of a young man and vices of an heir apparent; yet though always at the level of mediocrity, and sometimes lower, this worthless adventurer can no more escape the dangers and temptations of superhuman forces than can any other man. He will meet them everywhere, in the fury of Phedra and the beauty of Helen, in the devotion of Ariadne and in the chastity of Hippolytus. The doltish Hercules of *Alceste* is to discover within himself immense reserves of moral strength for his combat with Death; Theseus in the Labyrinth, however, is encumbered by the operatic trappings of his heroic garb, but is even more impeded by the romantic image which he has made of himself, and accordingly gets lost in the reflected lies of his own hall of mirrors. He is still far from the ancient ideal of the Delphic command, "Know thyself."

In a first version of *Ariane*, written in 1931, the wanderings within the interior of the Labyrinth were those of mere sophisticated adolescence. The trick of perpetual play of mirrors, which

equate the angles of incidence and reflection of self-love, was expressed in the almost indecent tone of persons coquetting with themselves, in sly connivance with their own destinies. When re-examined after an interval of some years, this tone proved as intolerable as that of endless facetiousness in Gide's recently published *Thésée*, which is confined throughout to the routines of conventional musical comedy or burlesque show. Admittedly, the heroes of myth can accompany us even in our moments of most conscious levity, but exclusive employment of the jocular vein, as of the tragic, tends dangerously to reduce the scope of myth, as well as of life.

*Ariane*, therefore, was at first re-touched and then re-written, and has for its author, at least, the interest of palimpsest. This allegorical comedy can have no value unless it succeeds in tracing exactly the itinerary of certain inner progressions. In this *Ariane* of 1946 the diverse tones of cantata and variety show in turn, the unlike methods of literary allusion and of photographic illusionism, the disparate styles of liturgy and of farce all have been used in the attempt to describe accurately this world of amusement parks and zoos, shooting galleries and brothels, museums and high places, prisons and caverns wherein we encounter, each one of us, our Minotaurs and our Gods.

\* \* \*

Like a nest of snakes which swarm together at each mating season, the complex story of Electra and her kin, as the involvement increases throughout the centuries, takes on all possible aspects of a criminal family. For court evidence we have death masques and golden daggers from the excavations at Mycenae, but we still lack knowledge of whatever ballad or chronicle Aeschylus may have used as the source of his typically Balkan, or typically Byzantine conspirators, who mourn their dead with the primitive wails of a Corsican wake.

Even as the prophets of the Old Testament, Aeschylus assembles in his *Oresteia* evidence for the mighty trial of Justice itself; but where the Hebrew prophet interprets a personal God as his ally



in combat with evil, the Greek is concerned to integrate man's existence within a universal law which shows favor to none, not even to the hero in man, but by which man is constantly judged. Even in the most disheartened passages of Isaiah, we can hear, if the ear be close to the ground, the first murmurings of the Messianic voice of the waters; but in Aeschylus there is only the low rumble of a falling stone. A mysterious gravity controls the movements of his mighty puppets, drawing each to its zenith and then to its nadir.

A Blake or a Dostoevsky assumes the coexistence of good and evil within each being; for Aeschylus, each character is successively priest and victim, judge and accused, innocent and guilty. All, like Cassandra, though to a lesser degree than that prophetess, are the media of divine forces which operate through and beyond them, instruments rather than heroes, victims more than martyrs. The Orestes and Electra of the *Choephorae* are less murderers than black-robed leaders of the mysteries, celebrants in a funeral rite which makes them at the same time celebrants in and impure. Agamemnon, in the first drama of the trilogy, is less a victor than the sacrificial offering led to the altar.

With Sophocles the hero first appears, a cry of revolt from the human heart. Where in Aeschylus all is divine rights and fatal retribution, Sophocles is to treat of man and woman in their revolutionary effort toward abstract justice. At the dark gateways of Thebes and of Mycenae the hard light of a rising sun strikes equally upon Electra and Antigone: the avenger is sister to the condemned; to one is confided the merciful aspect, to the other the judgment, two parts of that ideal justice which Sophocles realizes is nowhere to be found, but which is henceforth to be the object of man's eternal striving.

Aeschylus opposes the ancient matriarchal conceptions of the pre-Hellenic world with the masculine ideal of the Doric family; so while Clytemnestra, feminine tyrant of a vanished age and last vestige of the antique power of Queens, serves as pivot for the *Agamemnon*, the second play declares the supremacy of the paternal phantom. Likewise in the *Choephorae* the heroic pair,



Pylades and Orestes (who inevitably suggest to the patriotic Athenian the two tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogiton), take active roles, while to the feminine Electra is allotted a passive, though magical, role of watcher at the tomb.

Woman as well as man is assigned an heroic part in Sophocles and is invested, therefore, with some of the stoic qualities of that playwright's male universe. Sophocles is the first to give to Electra the title role of his tragedy of vengeance, and he tends to attribute to her, as does Phidias to his Pallas Athena, genuinely virile traits which are even more marked than those of his Antigone. Thus in two different works an almost manly young girl is the embodiment of his conception of justice. It is his Electra who still influences the Alexandrine sculptures of that heroine, which portray her as the stronger, older sister supporting a delicate, feminine young man. By the same subordination of specifically womanly characteristics Sophocles robs Clytemnestra of that rich and terrible complexity which Aeschylus had given her as mother, lover, wife, and mistress of the royal household, and makes of her instead a hard, abstract suggestion of absolute evil, like the Herodias or Jezebel of the Bible. He sums up the austerity of classicism at its height, which no longer conceives that a murderess can be a loving mother, or that the same woman can be both innocent and guilty, betrayed and betrayer.

Not till we come to the astounding *Electra* of Euripides does the mighty religious and tribal murder story of Aeschylus, kept severely abstract in the work of his direct successor, change back to a more human pattern, taking on in addition the dread features of a criminal record, or of a psychiatric case. *Downtrodden and Offended*, the title of one of Dostoevsky's first novels, would certainly fit this paradoxical play of Euripides, which treats less of justice than of settling a score. With this new Electra, taut, wretched, married in name only to a simple-hearted moujik, inciting to crime a wavering Orestes, and at last feigning a pregnancy in order to win her mother's pity and thus draw her victim into a death trap, Euripides is the first to break into the Pandora box of the subconscious.

The revolutionary treatment of the Electra theme in the hands of Euripides put an end to the use of this myth for some centuries, probably because it represented the acme of audacity which the Greek mind could conceive for this subject. We can only guess at what an Alexandrine drama on the story might have been, growing out of the palace revolutions of the Ptolemies; or a Roman *Electra*, with its Clytemnestra modelled upon the mother of Nero. Another reason for the virtual disappearance of the subject from Graeco-Roman tragedy may lie in the fact that any dramatization of the Electra theme must deal to some extent with the two basic problems of absolute justice and family solidarity, whereas the Alexandrine and Roman period is one in which the concept of justice vacillates, and the family tends to disintegrate. A moral and traditional treatment of the subject would have been merely academic in such times; but, on the other hand, the amorality of the period, however freely practised in life, did not go far enough in art to produce there a formal justification of perfidy and of parricide. It is as though the story of these filial murderers were too dangerously close to the reality of the times to provide the pleasurable thrill of horror that much more primitive legend still afforded, such as the cannibalism of Tantalus, the castration of Cronos, or the ritual slaughter of Iphigenia.

To the Renaissance poet, afitre to explore the whole realm of man's individuality, the religious problem of criminal retribution within the family was of little interest; however, treatment of the theme of vengeance increases in melodramatic splendor as the feeling for religious justification declines. Renaissance theatre is rife with avengers drawn from the local chronicles of Italy and of Spain, but Shakespeare alone, reviving under another name the Greek nightmare of family crime, dares show us an avenging son in the act of denouncing his mother. The supreme novelty of his Orestes, concerned neither with gods nor Furies but still impelled by a paternal ghost, lies in the fact that this hero of revenge tragedy has been welcomed as successor to the throne, rather than proscribed, and the theme of retribution begins to change to the modern theme of personal responsibility.

The Greek Orestes regains his rank, estate, and social position for himself and his sister only by means of his act of vengeance; the Nordic Orestes, on the contrary, temporarily safe in the affection of his mother and the apparent good graces of his stepfather, does not even begin to run a risk until he attempts to seek retribution. Agamemnon was murdered in broad daylight, the feat proclaimed to the open skies of antiquity, but the murder of Hamlet's father was a crime committed in secret which the son had to expose before meting it due punishment; the criminal act and the vengeance as well have become subterranean, and almost internal. The family story in Shakespeare has developed into a drama of the individual mind; no sister divides the avenging role of the young prince, so conspicuous in his mourning black, but Horatio stands by his side, like Pylades with Orestes. Most important of all, the vengeance of Hamlet either falls short of or goes beyond its aim, a defeat rather than a victory, utter destruction rather than change in régime. This "Revenger's Tragedy" proclaims once and for all the incapacity of modern man to identify himself with the traditional concept of vengeance.

The classicism of Racine is still further alienated from the barbaric inheritance of ritualistic matricide than was the individualism of the Renaissance. *Andromaque* presents an Orestes pursued by Furies but makes not the slightest allusion to the murder of a mother. The crime of Orestes in this play consists of suppressing a rival, not of killing his mother, and his crime is committed to win the woman he loves, and not to satisfy his sister. Even the name of Orestes seems to have been chosen by Racine only to suggest a vague but enduring halo of darkness and woe about the pale face of his tragic lover.

Such transformation of son into lover is other than mere concession to gallant tastes of the seventeenth century. No period has ever thought less about limiting the sources of unhappiness to childhood and family complexes. The clear comprehension of values in the world of the mind and the world of the senses, too, would suggest to a contemporary of Racine that this drama could only be placed in the period of Orestes' manhood, and in the



adult domain of the ambitions and of love. In the eighteenth century the *Electra* of Crébillon is similarly reduced to individualistic scale, while still focussing upon the original element of hatred, but the flat and melodramatic treatment of themes of individual will in this baroque successor of Corneille fails to give us the study of pure lust and cruelty which the century of Sade could have produced.

The new impetus for classical studies in the Renaissance had introduced the vogue for ornate, literary translations such as those of Baif. Toward the end of the nineteenth century an advance in studies of archaeology and of primitive societies gives rise to the fashion for literal and even archaic translations, all of which tend to overemphasize the elements of barbaric ritualism surviving in Greek drama. The very archaeological *Electra* of Hofmannsthal just misses dullness because of its oriental intensity and its German violence, thanks chiefly to the atmospheric suggestion of sex, already tinged with Freudianism, which surrounds the two sisters Electra and Chrysothemis. The barbaric coloring of Leconte de Lisle's *Electra* throws the myth back into a hypothetical pre-historic wilderness, and only succeeds in expressing the desire for escape and for reversion to barbarism which is typical of the man of 1900.

But close to the same time the new theories of psychology, and more specifically the hypotheses of psychoanalysis, in placing the Furies and the Sphinx once more within the mind of man, reopened for the myth a career almost as rich in possibilities as did the humanism of the Renaissance. From the moment that each family dining-room had its Orestes brandishing his spoon in his highchair, and its Electra toying mechanically with her knife, the ancient drama need no longer be relegated to the rank of a libretto, or of a college play, and we each began asking ourselves anxiously if we would or would not kill our Clytemnestra. The era of modernistic *Electras* was following that of the age of bronze.

As early as 1910 the ingenious irony of Barrès anticipated the present-day archaeologists in picturing a Mycenaean culture which

was decadent rather than primitive, Levantine rather than pre-historic, when he used the terms of another psychological system then in vogue to interpret the degenerate Orestes and equivocal Pylades of his *Voyage to Sparta*. Eugene O'Neill chose a forbidding mansion of an American town as setting for the neurotic and incestuous heroes of his vast and somewhat shapeless trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where the whole emphasis is placed upon the *delectationes morosae* of hating. An atmosphere of bourgeois mediocrity strangely mixed with medieval squalor pervades the family squabbles and political quarrels of Giraudoux's *Electra*, inspired by Freudian interpretations of childhood and by fearful memories of the riots of the Front Populaire. And latest of all, the harsh treatment of the Electra theme by Sartre in *The Flies*, though closer to Aeschylus in that it does pose a metaphysical problem again, is nevertheless farther away than ever from the bases of Greek thought in that the arbitrary and the absurd triumph brutally over the human.

Whether complex or bizarre, irritating or confused, these contemporary versions are in accord in three respects: they leave to the concept of justice only a subjective value; they suggest sexual motivation, evident or concealed, for the wrath of Electra and the insanity of Orestes; and they rank the instinctive and the subconscious above the *conscience*, in the two meanings, intellectual and moral, of this word now so out of fashion. The aesthetic genius of the ancients barred confusion of feelings as well as of modes, and only unconsciously approached the subconscious. The modern poet, unrestricted by aesthetic frameworks and unaided by the popular moral patterns which most of his contemporaries still accept (but which no longer afford a basis for masterpieces except in the anonymous art of the movies), uncertain or even hostile in the face of those categorical imperatives which sustained his predecessors, and ill at ease even before the concept of self and of fate, is left no alternative but to work his way down the summit which Aeschylus had achieved when at last he closed a door upon the blood and chaos of the *Choephorae*, and opened the final play of his trilogy by summoning a tribunal of elders and

gods, the first of its kind, to ratify Justice. In the legal discussion which ensues, the physiological argument of Apollo on behalf of man as procreator of his race in sharp opposition to the ancient predominance of the maternal Furies, takes on a terrifying psychological significance for the modern mind: deprived of the support of the Father by universal skepticism in matters of law and of dogma, plunged back into this black chaos of the womb from which four thousand years of civilization have tried to free him, the modern, analytic Orestes surrenders himself more completely than ever to the Hell-Hounds of Clytemnestra.

A l'accent familier nous devinons le spectre;  
Nos Pylades là-bas tendent les bras vers nous.  
"Pour rafraichir ton coeur nage vers ton Electre,"  
Dit celle dont jadis nous baisions les genoux.

Now that psychoanalytic theories have ceased to excite us as novelties or enigmas, the element which possibly attracts us the most in the multiple fatalities of the Atridae is this theme mysteriously touched upon at the end of Baudelaire's *Voyage*, the motif of separation and isolation, intensified as the two always are by the tragic exclusions which love involves. The story of Electra, for the present writer, exists only under the aspects of a tangle of roots, or the triangle of human limbs on the coin-pieces of Sicily, an indivisible group which is explained as much, and as little, by theories of the subconscious and of sex as it was formerly explained, or not explained, by moral duty and ties of blood. Orestes, Pylades, and Electra are partners in the same enterprise, closely but differently bound each to the other by danger, hatred, suffering and hope, chosen for the same aims and for the same death, accomplices more than kindred, allies rather than friends.

Naturally, so internal a drama dispenses with other actors. In *Electre ou La Chute des Masques* the peasant husband Theodore, but half initiated into the secrets of the trio, plays a part only in retaining certain functions of the choir as sympathizer and moderator. The pretense of marriage, suggested as a mere romantic situation in Euripides, approaches our own psychology



the moment that the refusal to consummate it comes from Electra herself, negative reflex of a young woman corrupted by her memories as an adolescent. For her the image of a lover has forever assumed the appealing and submissive countenance of Aegisthus. Theodore will get nothing from Electra, not only because he is poor, humble, and unversed in the horrible mysteries of her lineage and her childhood, but simply because he is a good man.

By his equivocal and unsavory role as accomplice, Pylades will profit, when his hour has come, from the eroticism in Electra which is fostered by an atmosphere of violence and scorn. Such a cynical adventurer can hold up a mirror to the face of this appallingly chaste woman, wherein she begins to see herself for the first time. The instinct which drives her back to the closed world of her own kin finds its fulfillment easily, one might say normally, in this double of Orestes, his inseparable friend. The iron virgin adopts towards these four men to whom she is bound by blood, complicity, hatred, and law, the manly attitude of her mother toward her own young lover; for the mother and daughter belong to that group of women who seek virile prerogatives in love. The vacillating sensuality and the moral and political compromises of Pylades are essentials for his admission into the magic circle which surrounds this sister and brother. These two outcasts welcome only a creature as morally undermined as they are themselves; and only a being half-destroyed would have consented to lose himself in their destiny. Between the adventurer and the orphans, the renegade and the parricides, is established a kind of kinship, confirmed by the community of dangers.

To this trio of persons indissolubly welded together, as if condemned to burn on the same pyre, the middle-aged couple, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, oppose a solid front, cemented by years of passionate love followed by years of tolerant understanding, that complicity of maturity made up of delights, rebuffs, debasements shared; a complicity which is more vulgar but more human, perhaps, than that of the three friends, or would seem so, at least, in the eyes of any judge who has passed the age of forty. In this drama, devoid of all ideological background, the final

revelation of Aegisthus will not produce, as a similar avowal by Claudius would have done in *Hamlet*, a total reversal of values and horrible tail-spin of conscience before a reality become suddenly unrecognizable. No evidence offered by the victim will serve to divert the knife of Orestes or his destiny. All external chance from this time on can only help him to fulfill, and not escape, his role of parricide.

When the door of the peasant hut closes upon the inseparable three, united by a crime for which the very motives have now been swept away, we must be made to feel that nothing will ever unbind these beings who will serve, each for the other two, as their gods and their Furies, their healers and their haunting ghosts. We know that no verdict of human Areopagus can ever give them peace, nor exorcise this ill-fate which they seem to set above peace.

The only resolution possible for them might be found, perhaps, in those hyperborean regions of Greek thought where Goethe established his *Iphigenie* and Gide his *Philoctète*; it would be born of a meeting as yet unexploited between Iphigenia and Electra, between the exile and the fugitives, these who have endured their destiny in the undergrounds of Mycenae, and that one who was irreparably cut off by the forces of Ocean, cold, and banishment. Impossible to foretell, at the moment in which we are, what bitterness or what joy, what wisdom or what deeper madness would come of such an encounter. The hour of reunions has not yet struck, nor the time for resolving the chord.

(Translated from the French by MARGUERITE YOURCENAR  
and GRACE FRICK)

# At the River's Edge

*by Cecil Hemley*



Into the garden Nebuchadnezzar, wild stallion,  
neighing with the wind, where the peacocks  
run in hasty flight from your stamping hooves:  
over your shoulders the torn purple and on your  
head agog the golden crown—into the garden  
from the tables where the weeping queen bunches  
her children into her arms. Oh divinity's askew;  
wild horse-god trampling down the flower beds,  
crawling on earth, hair into dirt, eating the buds.

Your chieftains come, whispering, gesticulating,  
shadows on the Euphrates. Your concubines strut  
white-legged through the glazed-brick rooms.  
High on the ziggurats astrologers foretell division  
of your kingdom and murder of your heirs—  
but you, forgetful of your sceptered  
strength, graze in the twilight at the river's edge.



# Nightingale of the Mud

Some Poems of Tristan Corbière Translated With a Note

by *Walter McElroy*



**D**ECEMBER 1873, Paris . . . the small volume of poems which appeared under the title, *Les amours jaunes*, had for a frontispiece a self-portrait of the author shown in convict's garb leaning against a ship's mast. It attracted no attention whatsoever. The whole edition was turned over eventually to the booksellers on the quays for sale at cut-rate prices. Such was the beginning and—except for the appearance of a few more poems in magazines—the end of Tristan Corbière's public career in his lifetime as a poet. Nothing else was forthcoming, because within less than two years he was dead, not quite having reached the age of thirty.

He had been dead nearly ten years when Paul Verlaine brought him to light, along with those other two precursors of French symbolism—Arthur Rimbaud, who in the year of Corbière's debut had announced in *Une saison en enfer* (at the age of seventeen) his decision to stop writing poetry and begin living it, and Stephane Mallarmé. Another, Jules Laforgue, left in his *Mélanges posthumes* a tribute to Corbière's influence on his own poetry. Verlaine's *poètes maudits* long since have gained general acceptance, except for Corbière, on whom alone still rests the malediction—such remains the verdict repeated by the official historians in words so nearly the same that one suspects them of reading each other more attentively than Corbière. Those critics who did examine his work after Verlaine's exhumation found it forbidding. To J. K. Huysmans Corbière seemed "*parler nègre*"; Remy de Gourmont would only concede him genius by fits and

starts; and even Laforgue, despite his own indebtedness, reproached him for having "*pas de métier*." Corbière's poems—all but the few preserved in anthologies—relapsed into obscurity. Only his name has been dutifully repeated.

The definitive edition of *Les amours jaunes* (1891) contains another of Corbière's self-portraits, the portrait of a pathetically lank and elongated creature with protuberant nose and lips, crippled and sickly. The consciousness of his ugliness—which came upon him in his adolescence, the grotesque product of his arthritis—dominated Corbière's life and work. So ugly was he that to his fellow Bretons, among whom he spent nearly all his short life, he was "*l'ancou*," the very spectre of death. In what is supposed to be his earliest poem, *Le Crapaud*, he chose for his symbol a toad, "*le rossignol de la boue*." (Later when he went to Paris to live in a sixth-floor room in Montmartre, he nailed up over his chimney a toad's dried and squashed carcass.) To accompany *Le Crapaud* he drew another of his self-portraits, showing himself seated with his knees in giant boots touching his chin, his thighs bare. The bizarre costumes of the self-portraits were not imaginary. As if over-compensating for his sensitivity about his homeliness, Corbière used to shock his neighbors deliberately by dressing in the jumper and wooden sabots of a convict, in the hip-high boots of a seaman—even once in a bishop's cassock which he had brought back from his one expedition abroad, a trip to Italy made when he was twenty-three.

Born at Morlaix on the Breton coast (in 1845), Corbière was the son of an ex-sailor, port official and steamboat owner who turned to writing novels which were the first unromanticized accounts in French literature of life at sea. The sea became Tristan's passion; and though his physical weakness prevented his following the one destiny he thought more heroic than any other, a seaman's, he devoted not only much of his greatest poetry to it, but also much of his life, daring (and sometimes suffering) shipwreck in constant forays up and down the coast by canoe and sailboat, often in the wildest storms. He even carried his canoe into his bedchamber and slept in it; and in the last months be-

fore his death he sometimes rose from his sickbed to wander up and down the beach. Out of his intimacy with sailors and light-house keepers, with the wild birds of the sea and the sea itself in every sort of weather, grew those mordant poems in which Corbière found in the seaman the symbol of man's defiance of nature—*La Fin, Matelots, Le Bossu Bitor*. One has only to compare such a poem as *La Fin* with the source of the quotation by which it is prefaced, Victor Hugo's *Océano Nox*, to note how much more profound is Corbière's apprehension of the reality with which both deal.

Corbière's native Brittany—not the Brittany of romanticized folk customs but a dour and mist-ridden land of people in rags, vermin-infested, with sores—interpreted with hard-boiled clarity and yet with tender understanding, was the source of his strongest work—the sea poems, the poems based on peasant life, *Cris d'Aveugle, La Rapsodie foraine et le Pardon de Sainte-Anne*. In these poems Corbière found full scope for the oceanic violence of his rage against the miseries of man's life.

But besides Corbière *breton* there was Corbière *parisien*. This second Corbière is the Corbière whose literary influence has been the greater—Corbière the wit, the skilful self-mocker whose complaint is unrequited love. This is the Corbière echoed by Laforgue and Verlaine, by Eliot in such exercises as *Mélange adulte de tout* and by Pound in the *H. S. Mauberley* poems.

Corbière's brief interval in Paris was preceded by the arrival at the *pension-hôtellerie* at Roscoff (in Brittany) which he frequented along with his friends, the local painters and wits, of a rich young idler, *le comte* Rodolphe de Battine, and his mistress, Josefina Cuchiani, a statuesque blue-eyed Italian blonde who had played bit parts on the Paris stage. As was his custom, Corbière made overtures toward acquaintance by caricaturing the new arrivals on the tablecloth. Soon he had fallen hopelessly in love with Josefina, whom he renamed Marcelle; and she, quixotically attracted by his very ugliness, responded. It pleased her lover to be indulgent; he was amused. The three became inseparable companions, making constant excursions in Tristan's boat. When



the count and his companion returned to Paris, Corbière followed a few months later, in the spring of 1872. Except for a few of his fellow Bretons, artists, with one of whom he shared a studio and whom he sometimes entertained by playing the hurdy-gurdy, he had no other acquaintances in Paris, but sallied out only for his nightly reunions with Rodolphe and Marcelle at dinner-time. It was Marcelle to whom he dedicated *Les amours jaunes* (she shared the honor with his father, who appeared in the dedication as "*l'auteur du Négrier*," his best-known novel). But Corbière's passionate and rude love was of course not, under the circumstances, returned, as the bitter poems which grew out of it make clear. In a lesser poet the impulse toward despair, leading to exclusive preoccupation with self-analysis, could only have led—as it was to lead in the whole symbolist school which followed Corbière—toward over-intellectualization, cut off from contact with life; but Corbière's hold on reality was too fast. Even in the throes of self-pity, he could still hurl his sarcasm at himself. The stay in Paris was brief, interrupted by return trips to Brittany and ended finally by the onset of his last sickness. He was taken back to die in his birthplace, where his last request was that the room be filled with armfuls of his native heather.

Little read even in France, Corbière remains still less known to English readers, not only because of critical neglect but also because one of his poetry's chief virtues, its strong tie with common speech, makes it extraordinarily difficult to translate. It is time the critical neglect were ended. The standard complaint against Corbière of the academic critic—that he passed beyond propriety in his liberties with French prosody—retains little cogency now in the face of such persuasive arguments as Louis Aragon's, following the brilliant example of Guillaume Apollinaire, for a relaxation of outmoded conventions. Corbière's own opinion of contemporary examples of orthodox metrics he expressed with scathing effectiveness:

Vers filés à la main et d'un pied uniforme,  
Emboitant bien le pas, par quatre en peloton,

Qu'en marquant la césure, un des quatre s'endorme . . .  
Ca peut dormir debout comme soldats de plomb.<sup>1</sup>

Granted that the texture of Corbière's verse is gauche and raucous: these are predictable qualities in a rebel against the mellifluous reveries of the Romantics and the fustian pomposity of the Parnassians. Perhaps more than any poet of his age in France, Corbière tried to plumb reality to its depths—to deal with man's profoundest reactions to his struggle on earth. It was an heroic attempt, and perhaps more actual reading of the poems in our own time will reveal how much more nearly Corbière succeeded than appeared to those *fin de siècle* critics who felt it necessary to cite his untimely death as excuse for his failure to meet their standards. If to the English reader the difficulties of translation remain, certainly it is worth while to face them: the rewards are worth the effort.

<sup>1</sup> Verses unreeled foot by foot with a plod,  
By fours locking step in platoons they meet.  
To mark the caesura, one of the four will nod  
And like a lead soldier, go to sleep on his feet.

## QUATRE POEMES PAR TRISTAN CORBIERE

### I

#### PARIS NOCTURNE

C'est la mer, — calme plat. — Et la grande marée  
Avec un grondement lointain s'est retirée . . .  
Le flot va revenir se roulant dans son bruit.  
Entendez-vous gratter les crabes de la nuit?

C'est le Styx asséché: le chiffonier Diogène,  
La lanterne à la main, s'en vient avec sans-gêne.  
Le long du ruisseau noir, les poètes pervers  
Pêchent: leur crâne creux leur sert de boîte à vers.

C'est le champ: pour glaner les impures charpies  
S'abat le vol tournant des hideuses harpies;  
Le lapin de gouttière à l'affût des rongeurs  
Fuit les fils de Bondy, nocturnes vendangeurs.

C'est la mort: la police gît. — En haut l'amour  
Fait sa sieste, en tâtant la viande d'un bras lourd  
Où le baiser éteint laisse sa plaque rouge.  
L'heure est seule. Ecoutez: pas un rêve ne bouge.

C'est la vie: écoutez, la source vive chante  
L'éternelle chanson sur la terre gluante  
D'un dieu marin tirant ses membres nus et verts  
Sur le lit de la Morgue . . . et les yeux grands ouverts.



FOUR POEMS BY TRISTAN CORBIERE

(Translated by WALTER McELROY)

I

NOCTURNAL PARIS

It's the sea, —calm expanse. —And with far-off roar  
The vast tide has gone out . . . Now once more  
The wave comes back wallowing in its noise and withdraws.  
Do you hear the night crabs scraping their claws?

It's the dried-up Styx: ragpicker Diogenes,  
Lantern in hand, arrives without ceremonies.  
Perverse poets along the black spate  
Are angling: their hollow skulls hold worms for bait.

It's a field: in search of their dirty gleanings alight  
A flock of harpies, hideous in whirling flight;  
The gutter rabbit in watch for rodent scavengers  
Flees the sons of Bondy,<sup>1</sup> nocturnal vintagers.

It's death: the policeman lies dead. —While love  
Fondling heavy-handed its flesh, takes a nap above  
Where extinguished kisses leave their red smear.  
The hour is alone. Listen: not a dream will stir.

It's life: listen, the living spring chants  
Its eternal song over the slimy countenance  
Of a sea god sprawling his green and naked limbs  
On the bed of the Morgue . . . and the big eyes with parted  
rims.

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<sup>1</sup> The forest of Bondy near Paris, once famous as a bandits' haunt.

## II RAPSODIE DU SOURD

L'homme de l'art lui dit: —Fort bien, restons-en là.  
Le traitement est fait: vous êtes sourd. Voilà  
Comme quoi vous avez l'organe bien perdu. —  
Et lui comprit trop bien, n'ayant pas entendu.

—“Eh bien, merci, monsieur, vous qui daignez me rendre  
La tête comme un bon cercueil.  
Désormais, à crédit, je pourrai tout entendre  
Avec un légitime orgueil . . .

*A l'oeil.* —Mais gare à l'oeil jaloux, gardant la place,  
De l'oreille au clou! . . . —Non. —A quoi sert de braver!  
. . . Si j'ai sifflé trop haut le ridicule en face,  
En face, et bassement, il pourra me baver! . . .

Moi, mannequin muet, à fil banal! — Demain,  
Dans la rue, un ami peut me prendre la main,  
En me disant: vieux pot . . . , ou rien, en radouci;  
Et je lui répondrai: — Pas mal et vous, merci! —

Si l'un me corne un mot, j'enrage de l'entendre;  
Si quelqu'autre se tait: serait-ce par pitié? . . .  
Toujours, comme un *rébus*, je travaille à surprendre  
Un mot de travers . . . — Non. — On m'a donc oublié!

— Ou bien — autre guitare — un officieux être  
Dont la lippe me fait le mouvement du paître,  
Croit me parler . . . Et moi je tire, en me rongeant,  
Un sourire idiot — d'un air intelligent!

Bonnet de laine grise enfoncé sur mon âme!  
Eh — coup de pied de l'âne . . . Hue! Une bonne-femme,  
Vieille Limonadière, aussi, de la Passion,

RHAPSODY OF THE DEAF MAN

Said the expert: "All right, let's call it a day.  
The treatment is finished: you're deaf. That's the way  
It is: the organ is quite gone." And every word  
He understood only too well, not having heard.

—"Oh well, thanks, Doctor, for condescending  
To convert my head into a shroud.  
Hereafter I'll be able to understand everything,  
Taking all on trust, and be rightly proud."

*And so what?* —Watch out or the jealous eye will replace  
The hocked ear! . . .—No. What use will defiance be?  
. . . If I whistle too loud at ridicule to its face,  
To my face, and treacherously, it will defy me! . . .

Dumb mannikin, I, on the common string! I may meet  
Tomorrow a friend who will seize my hand on the street,  
Saying: "Old man" . . . or nothing, taking his cue,  
And I'll answer: "Not bad, thanks, and you?"

If someone blares his words, my anger will rise;  
If another says nothing: would it be through good grace?  
Always like a rebus, I labor to surprise  
One shuttling word . . .—No, mine's the forgotten face!

—Or—horse of another color—some officious fellow  
Whose thick lip maneuvers like a herdsman will bellow  
Thinking to converse . . . And I, fidgeting the while,  
Pull—with intelligent air—an idiot's smile!

Hood of gray woolen swaddling my brain!  
Ah—the donkey's hoof . . . Gee up! A good dame,  
Peddler of lemonade, also of compassion,



Peut venir saliver sa sainte compassion  
Dans ma *trompe-d'Eustache*, à pleins cris, à plein cor,  
Sans que je puisse au moins lui marcher sur un cor!

— Bête comme une vierge et fier comme un lépreux,  
Je suis là, mais absent . . . On dit: Est-ce un gâteaux,  
Poète muselé, hérisson à rebours?  
Un haussement d'épaule, et ça veut dire: un sourd.

— Hystérique tourment d'un Tantale acoustique!  
Je vois voler des mots que je ne puis happer;  
Gobe-mouche impuissant, mangé par un moustique,  
Tête de turc gratis où chacun peut taper.

O musique céleste: entendre, sur du plâtre,  
Gratter un coquillage! un rasoir, un couteau  
Grinçant dans un bouchon! . . . Un couplet de théâtre!  
Un os vivant qu'on scie! un monsieur! un rondeau! . . .

— Rien — Je parle sous moi . . . Des mots qu'à l'air je jette  
*De chic*, et sans savoir si je parle en indou . . .  
Ou peut-être en canard, comme la clarinette  
D'un aveugle bouché qui se trompe de trou.

— Va donc, balancier soûl affolé dans ma tête!  
Bats en branle ce bon tam-tam, chaudron fêlé  
Qui rend la voix de femme ainsi qu'une sonnette,  
Qu'un coucou! . . . quelquefois: un moucheron ailé . . .

— Va te coucher, mon coeur! et ne bats plus de l'aile.  
Dans la lanterne sourde étouffons la chandelle,  
Et tout ce qui vibrait là — je ne sais plus où —  
Oubliette où l'on vient de tirer le verrou.

— Soyez muette pour moi, contemplative Idole.  
Tous les deux, l'un par l'autre, oubliant la parole,  
Vous ne me direz mot: je ne répondrai rien . . .  
Et lors rien ne pourra dédorer l'entretien.

*Le silence est d'or* (Saint Jean Chrysostome)

May come up to drool in her holy fashion  
At my Eustachian tube with the blast of a horn!

—Foolish as a virgin and proud as a leper, I am here  
But not here . . . What have we, an imbecile? someone  
will jeer,  
A muzzled poet, a cross-grained lout?  
A shrug of the shoulders, crying: Deaf! like a shout.

—Hysteric torment of Tantalus' acoustic inferno!  
I watch soar off the words I cannot trap;  
Impotent fly-catcher, eaten by a mosquito,  
Turk's head at which, gratis, each takes his rap.

O celestial music: to hear, against plaster, the grit  
Of a shell! A razor, a knife's slicing blow  
Gnash against cork! . . . The words of a stage skit!  
A live bone sawed! A gentleman! A rondeau!

—Nothing. —I talk to myself . . . my words for effect let  
Fly, not knowing if I talk in Hindu . . . or maybe  
Even the language of ducks, like the clarinet  
Which a blindman with eyes stopped plays off key.

—Go on, tipsy pendulum, frantic in my brain!  
Bat this joggling tom-tom, this cracked vat  
Transforming a woman's voice to the tinkling refrain  
Of a bell, to a cuckoo! . . . at times a winging gnat . . .

—Go lie down, heart! and stir wings no more for flight.  
In the dark-lantern smother the candle's light  
And what trembled there—where, I can tell no more—  
Dungeon where I hear the bolt drawn at the door.

Be mute for me, contemplative Idol, we each,  
One with the other, forgetting men's speech,  
You will say nothing, I shall answer not a word . . .  
And nothing will be able to shake our accord.

### III HEURES

Aumône au malandrin en chasse!  
Mauvais oeil à l'oeil assassin!  
Fer contre fer au spadassin!  
—Mon âme n'est pas en état de grâce!—

Je suis le fou de Pampelune,  
J'ai peur du rire de la Lune,  
Cafarde, avec son crêpe noir . . .  
Horreur! tout est donc sous un éteignoir?

J'entends comme un bruit de crécelle . . .  
C'est la male heure qui m'appelle.  
Dans le creux des nuits tombe: un glas . . . deux glas.

J'ai compté plus de quatorze heures . . .  
L'heure est une larme—Tu pleures,  
Mon coeur! Chante encor, va! —ne compte pas.

### IV LA FIN

Oh! combien de marins, combien de capitaines  
(V. Hugo—*Oceano nox.*)

Eh bien, tous ces marins, —matelots, capitaines,  
Dans leur grand Océan à jamais engloutis,  
Partis insoucieux pour leurs courses lointaines,  
Sont morts, —absolument comme ils étaient partis.

Allons! c'est leur métier, ils sont morts dans leur bottes!  
Leur *boujaron* au coeur, tout vifs dans leurs capotes . . .  
— *Morts* . . . Merci: la *Camarde* a pas le pied marin;  
Qu'elle couche avec vous: c'est votre bonne-femme . . .  
— Eux, allons donc: Entiers! enlevés par la lame!  
Ou perdus dans un grain . . .



### III HOURS

Alms for the robber hot in chase!  
Evil eye for the eye of murder!  
Sword across sword for marauder!  
—My soul is not in a state of grace!—

I am the fool of Pampelune,  
I fear the laughter of the moon,  
Hypocrite, with his funeral pall . . .  
O horror! a candle snuffer blacks out all.

Like the whirl of a rattle I hear  
The hour of ill that calls me near.  
In the hollows of nightfall tolls a knell . . . a knell.

I have told off more than fourteen hours . . .  
Each hour is a tear. —My heart cowers,  
Weeping! . . . O sing again! Cease to tell.

### IV THE END

Oh! combien de marins, combien de capitaines  
(V. Hugo—*Océano nox.*)

How now, sailors and skippers—so many hands  
By their mighty Ocean engulfed forever in shipwreck . . .  
Careless laying their courses for faroff lands,  
And dead—as sure as they set foot on deck.

But it's all in the day's work; they died with their boots on!  
Lively in their pea-jackets, their grog tossed down . . .  
— *Dead* . . . Sure: the old Reaper has no sea legs at all;  
May she lie with you: be your good wife in the grave . . .  
— Ha! every mother's son: swept off by the wave!  
Or lost in a squall . . .

Un grain . . . est-ce la mort, ça? La basse voilure  
Battant à travers l'eau! — Ca se dit *encombrer* . . .  
Un coup de mer plombé, puis la haute mature  
Fouettant les flots ras, — et ça se dit *sombrer*.

— Sombrier. — Sondez ce mot. Votre *mort* est bien pâle  
Et pas grand'chose à bord, sous la lourde rafale . . .  
Pas grand'chose devant le grand sourire amer  
Du matelot qui lutte. — Allons donc, de la place! —  
Vieux fantôme éventé, la Mort change de face:  
La Mer! . . .

Noyés? — Eh allons donc! Les *noyés* sont d'eau douce.  
— Coulés! corps et biens! Et, jusqu'au petit mousse,  
Le défi dans les yeux, dans les dents le juron!  
A l'écume crachant une chique râlée,  
Buvant sans hauts-de-cœur *la grand'tasse salée* . . .  
— Comme ils ont bu leur boujaron. —

\* \* \*

Pas de fond de six pieds, ni rats de cimetière:  
Eux ils vont aux requins! L'âme d'un matelot,  
Au lieu de suinter dans vos pommes de terre,  
Respire à chaque flot.

— Voyez à l'horizon se soulever la houle;  
On dirait le ventre amoureux  
D'une fille de joie en rut, à moitié soûle . . .  
Ils sont là! — La houle a du creux. —

Ecoutez, écoutez la tourmente qui beugle! . . .  
C'est leur anniversaire. — Il revient bien souvent. —  
O poète, gardez pour vous vos chants d'aveugle;  
— Eux: le *De Profundis* que leur corne le vent.  
. . . Qu'ils roulent infinis dans les espaces vierges!  
Qu'ils roulent verts et nus,  
Sans clous et sans sapins, sans couvercle, sans cierges . . .  
— Laissez-les donc rouler, *terriens* parvenus!

A squall . . . death is it? the lowering canvas lashed  
Across the water! — This they call *floundering* . . .  
A buffet from leaden seas, and the high masts thrashed  
Close to the waves—this they call *foundering*.

—Founder. —Sound the word. Your death, how pale  
And so small a thing besides, in a heavy gale . . .  
So small a thing against the great bitter grin  
Of the struggling sailor. — Ha, give up your place!—  
Giddy old phantom, Death changes face:  
The Sea! . . .

Drowned? — Ha! None but freshwater sailors drown.  
—Hands and cargo, and the cabin boy even, gone down,  
Defiance in their eyes, in their teeth an oath!  
The quid at the spume with the death rattle spat,  
Swigging deep of the long and salty draught.  
—As they swigged their grog, and nothing loath.—

\* \* \*

For them no graveyard rats, no six feet of sod:  
They go to the sharks! Not for the mariner's soul  
To ooze into your potatoes beneath the clod;  
It breathes from the sea's roll.

—Look there, above the horizon swelling, the billow;  
Belly in amorous urge  
Of a trull, call it, tipsy tossing on her pillow . . .  
There rest them! — in hollows of the surge.—

— Listen, listen to the hurricane rumble! . . .  
Their anniversary. — It returns without fail!—  
O poet, keep to yourself your blindman's mumble;  
—For them, the *De Profundis* blown by the gale.

. . . May they roll through the virgin spaces, green and nude!  
May they roll to infinity  
Free of nails and of coffin, of candles, of shroud  
—So let them, O upstart landlubbers, roll with the sea!



# The Boy with the Dreamy Eyes

*by Michael Shurtleff*



HE USED to come into the place every morning for breakfast. It was an old shack of a building and Maime Crowe didn't fuss or bother with it very much, but it was her restaurant and her livelihood; it was just her good fortune to be located near the army post on the outskirts of the city and so inevitably her place became a hangout of the soldiers. This one fellow I'm talking about used to go there more often than the rest of us. None of us would trudge across the field from the barracks when it was raining, but Bill always would. Maime Crowe was hardly the motherly type and her "home cooking" wasn't the kind anyone would ever say came out of his home. Except that he was one of those rain-or-shine boys and fond of the habits he'd made, there didn't seem much reason for his morning pilgrimage. That was, until Elsie came.

"I didn't really want to get anyone else in here," Maime Crowe would say in explaining the sudden, unexpected presence of Elsie. "I like it better bein' alone and not havin' to worry about someone else." Maime would push her tangled hair around a bit and resetttle the pencil she always wore. "She came in here one night when there was a pack of you fellows and she started helpin' me when she saw how busy I was. So when she asked if she could stay to work with me, what could I do?"

We all admitted there was nothing else she could do and complimented her on an irrefutable logic. Elsie brought a different air to Maime Crowe's, in her quiet, unremarkable way. The sluggishness that hung in aura over everything Maime did was lifted by Elsie's insistent, bustling busyness. There were even times

now when you could honestly say the place was clean, but Maime looked upon the whole transformation with a skeptical eye. "What's the good of all that fussin'?" she'd drawl. "The food don't taste no different, honey." But even if Bertha, the big, black indolent cook, didn't change her cooking methods, Elsie changed the way in which it was served, and to us it meant the difference between just some more army grub and something that seemed at least a little better.

At first, Bill didn't seem to pay any more attention to Elsie than he did to anyone else when he came into Maime's every morning. Elsie seldom said anything to anyone who didn't say something to her first, so no one expected those two quiet birds to get together; but come to think of it, that's exactly what we should have expected. Bill took to staying in the mornings long after the rest of us left and longer than he should have; he worked for a major who didn't seem to care if he got there at eight or eight-fifteen, so nothing happened about that. At first, Elsie would just linger a little over her servings to Bill, and then it developed into whispered conversations in which Elsie would giggle and act in ways unknown to us.

She was still in her teens, a tiny unknowing thing from Mississippi but precocious in one respect as is the way with Southern girls. It was difficult to see how it could be anything but an awkward romance, with Elsie being coy and demure and Bill pretending to act as someone's big brother. There was a strange sort of appeal to Bill, though; he had rosy pink cheeks that never seemed to fade and big brown eyes that had a dreamy, misty quality about them and made you wonder what he was thinking. You never knew; he seldom said anything. He could come ambling across the field in that easy, graceful gait of his and put himself on one of Maime's rickety stools as if he were going to spend the rest of his life there.

Pretty soon Elsie would work her way, with elaborate unconcern, to where Bill was. "Well, hello there, Bill," she would drawl, just as if there were some element of surprise in his being there. "G'morning, Elsie," he would say, and then they

would go through a complicated process of ordering, with Elsie suggesting this or that was good and Bill insisting he didn't like it or that it reminded him of something his mother used to make. The air of naiveté they both assumed made the spectators a little impatient at times, and some of the fellows expressed their annoyance.

"Hey, Elsie, gonna drool over Bill's coffee cup all morning?" they'd holler at her, and Elsie would blush and start wiping off the counter with her towel. Or, "Bill," they'd call, "ain't you going to let the rest of us get anything to eat here?" Bill would grin and look only all the more dreamy, so there wasn't much fun in teasing him.

Maime Crowe watched the whole affair with her usual lack of concern. If one of the men said something to her about it, she'd yawn extensively and say, "Well, Bill seems a nice enough fellow and it's right enough Elsie got herself a man. 'Course they do seem to take forever to getting around to it, but don't ya think it's better that way?" Every now and then she would feel called upon to express the proprietress in her and she would call over to Elsie, "Stop your mooning, gal, and watch you don't fall in the soup." This would amuse Maime so much that it was all she could do to keep her balance on the stool as she rocked back and forth with laughter.

It wasn't long until Bill began to take to coming to Maime's late in the evening, sitting over in the shadows of a corner, watching with dreamy, speculative eyes while Elsie dealt with last customers and prepared to close for the night. Around ninety-three, Maime Crowe would yawn and scratch her head with her pencil, announce loudly, "That's all, boys," and prepare to receive last minute payments as Elsie tried to serve the men who wanted one more cup of coffee. Maime would fuss around with her cash register, adding, subtracting and puzzling until she'd just sweep the money into a dirty cotton bag and let it go at that. By this time, all except a few of the men had gone, so Maime would march through the door with a "Goodnight, you all. Hurry back." Then she'd stick her head back in and yell, "Elsie,



don't forget to turn out the lights and lock the door." All this time, Bill would sit in his corner, smoking, drinking his coffee, saying nothing. Elsie went around wiping off tables and shooing away last customers; every now and then she would glance covertly in Bill's direction but he never made any sign to her.

There were some evenings when I would sit with him and we'd talk about situations back in the company or what dogs the men were we had to work for, just as any soldier will do; but whenever the talk came around to what we had done in civilian life and all the glorious, free things we would do when the war was over, Bill said nothing at all. The only thing any of us really knew about him was that he'd been a clerk in a grocery store in Joplin, Missouri, and we knew he received letters from his mother there. The rest we could only speculate upon, and since Bill seldom did anything to attract anyone's attention, speculation went little further than the momentary wonderings you have about almost anyone. Bill could sit for hours without saying or doing anything more than lighting a cigarette, so the other fellows let him alone for the most part. I used to enjoy sitting with him occasionally; even if we didn't say anything. I felt rested and relaxed to be with him and know I didn't have to make any effort if I didn't want to. Once I said to him, after Elsie had been peeking our way, "Elsie's a pretty kid, isn't she?" He blew out the smoke through his nostrils and sat there for a moment, mildly, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him before.

"Yes, I guess she is," he said.

And that's all there was said about the matter.

It got to be that after a while Bill would stay in the evenings after the rest of us had gone; he'd help Elsie fix the tables for the night, turn off the lights, lock the door. They'd walk slowly along the shadowy street, hand in hand, two blocks down to the rooming house where Elsie lived. The nights were warm and close then, and the smell of jasmine was overwhelming. I imagined these two innocents finding the southern nights an irresistible impetus to their love.

We all accepted the affair and, outside of a few skeptical kid-

ders, I think everyone was rather attracted by the naive charm of it. But one day, Bill suddenly stopped coming to Maime Crowe's; he didn't show up that morning or that night. Elsie kept watching the door and after each soldier came in, she'd set her lips in a firm line and scrub her counter with great preoccupation. Service was fast but erratic that day; there was no knowing for sure what you'd receive, and Elsie made no response to the usual sallies directed her way. That night before lights out in the barracks, one of the fellows called over to Bill, "Say, Bill, how come you weren't at Maime's at all today?"

Bill didn't put down the mystery he was reading nor did he glance away from it. There was a moment of silence and then he said, very quietly, "Is there anything says I *have* to go over to Maime's to eat?"

This went on for nearly two weeks but no one made any reference to Elsie or Bill about it. Maime became loud and indignant about everything and would curse out like an old war horse at every mistake Elsie would make. And Elsie had never made so many before. One noon, Maime and I were talking over our coffee and I asked her, "Why do you yell at Elsie so? What's she done to deserve that?"

Maime grunted and resettled her pencil in her hair. "Now you listen here," she pointed her long bony finger at me, "Just because that boy went off and left her ain't no reason for her to moon around here and ruin all my trade." Maime nodded her head emphatically. "She'll just have to toe the mark, that's all. I ain't gonna stand for no foolishness in my place."

It was that evening that Elsie came up to me as I was getting ready to pay my check. She stood uncertainly with her hands folded behind her back, looking like a penitent little girl. "Hello, Elsie," I said.

"Hello, Jack," she said, and just stood there.

"Is there something I could do for you, Elsie?" I asked.

She smiled very faintly, momentarily, and then knit her brows. "Yes, please. Would you give this to him?" She handed me a long white envelope with "Bill" written on it.

"Sure. Be glad to," I said.

Elsie put her finger up to her lip, as if she were about to say something more. "Thanks, Jack," she said and turned quickly away to clear the counter.

Bill was in bed when I got back to the barracks, but I got my flashlight and woke him up. "What the hell do you want?" he grumbled, rubbing his eyes. I handed him the smudged, crumpled envelope. He took it and smiled wisely, knowingly, much to my surprise. "I've been waiting for this," he said. He pushed the letter under his pillow and turned over on his side away from my flashlight. "Goodnight," he said.

Bill made no appearance at Maime's the next morning, but that evening found him in his accustomed corner. Elsie sang and joked like a regular floor show and seemed hardly able to contain herself, although every now and then she would glance apprehensively and uncertainly toward Bill's corner. I stayed until closing time that night and watched them walk slowly down the street until they were hidden by the low-hanging branches of the magnolia trees. Elsie had hold of Bill's hand and was talking rapidly, but Bill was saying nothing. I could imagine the dreamy eyes and the detached expression on his face.

A week later they were married, with Maime calling a holiday closing to celebrate the occasion. But Monday, Elsie was back at work, Bill sat there at the counter eating his breakfast, Maime held forth with pearls of wisdom at her register, and everything went on just as it had before. As the days and months went by the only change that became apparent was that Elsie was pregnant and Bill talked to her less than he had before.

Bill continued to live in the barracks, spending a few nights a week in town. He began to miss an evening or two a week at Maime Crowe's. On those evenings, Elsie worked quietly and with downcast eyes, almost as if she performed her duties in a reverie. Maime would sit there with a skeptical, dubious look as she eyed Elsie's rotund form, and then she would shrug her shoulders and push her pencil deeper into her hair.

About a month later, Elsie disappeared. The fellows would

come in, look around, and call to Maime, "Hey, Maime, where the hell's Elsie?" Maime, forced back to bustling and carting orders again, was cross and in no mood for either questioning or banter. "Shut up and mind your business, you bastards!"

This was greeted with feigned shock and surprise. The boys would whistle, settle their caps on the back of their heads, and say, "Why Maime. Such language from a lady—tsk, tsk," and all wag their heads together in mock disapproval. Finally, she'd grin at them and say, "Oh, go on with you," but she'd say nothing about Elsie.

Bill continued to come into Maime's in the mornings. She said nothing to him that was not required by their business transactions. Several of us saw Bill in town off and on, with different women, but particularly with the hat-check girl from the Skyline Bar. No one ever said anything to him about Elsie; what was there to say?

We gradually forgot about it, although I'd never satisfied my mind on the matter. One morning a couple of months after Elsie's leaving, it all came back to us with a bang. We were in Maime's having breakfast as usual. Bill was sitting next to me at the counter; Maime brought him his coffee and set it down in front of him with a clatter.

"What are you going to do about her?" she hissed at him, scarcely opening her mouth in her anger.

Bill looked up at her with a dreamy stare, devoid of any expression except mild amusement. "Do about who, Maime?"

"You know damn well who I mean!" Maime spoke in a low voice, but it was almost a growl. Everyone in the place stopped eating and talking and watched her in fascination. "First, you lead her on until she didn't know what day it was. Then you get her pregnant and so she's in your way, so you send her back to Mississippi." Maime's voice sounded like the scrapings of a razor.

"Well, what do you say?" She banged her fist on the counter so that the dishes jumped and settled again.

Bill leaned his thin body against the counter and ran his hand through his sandy, reddish hair. He looked up at Maime. His



thin indeterminate mouth turned down in the corners and he said, "Nothing," but other than that he showed no expression or emotion.

"Now she writes and asks to come back," Maime went on. She clutched the edge of the counter. "She's your wife. She's got a right to come back. And you wrote her that if she dared come back here, you'd kill her."

You could scarcely hear anyone breathing in the room after Maime said that. No one moved; we sat there watching them. Maime said, "If you weren't a soldier, you wouldn't do a thing like this. And you couldn't get away with it. But you guys—all of you—" and she looked around at our group with disgust, "think because you're soldiers now, you don't need to be decent no more."

She leaned over and slapped Bill across the face, a loud whack that resounded through the restaurant. "Now get out of here," she said.

Bill got up and put his cap on. Without hurry, he reached into his pocket and pulled out some change which he put on the counter. He didn't look at any of us or say anything. He just got up and walked out the door. We could see his slow, graceful gait through the window as he ambled across the field toward the post.

Maime went out into the kitchen and in a little while she came back with some orders. Little by little, we all started talking again, each of us pretending nothing had happened. I sat there after they had all gone. Maime was stacking the dishes. "Well, that's that," she said. After that, we never talked about it again.

## VI. The Importance of B. Traven

by H. R. Hays



**B** TRAVEN has the distinction of being everywhere famous except in the United States. Only three of his novels have • been published in this country and of these only *The Death Ship* has had much of an audience. Yet Traven is a genius and his work should be of interest to anyone of the modern temper, to anyone with the slightest concern for the problems of our time. For Traven belongs in the tradition of the great satirists, the lusty haters, and his voice cuts through the babble of lies and platitudes which befores the surface of the earth, like a loud bronx cheer.

Because of his eccentric reticence various legends have sprung up about him, the most persistent being the theory that he is an American. A friend of the writer's testifies, however, that he has seen Traven manuscripts and letters, written in German, in the office of the latter's Swiss publisher. This accords with internal evidence. Though some of Traven's novels were published in Berlin and some in Zurich, the colloquial German style is the same in all, and in all of them certain words are written with dialect spelling. The English versions published by Knopf were furnished by Traven himself and they are free paraphrases of the German rather than translations. While the German versions of the same books are written from a European point of view and the references are European, the English paraphrases are done from a would-be American point of view and references to details of American life are inserted. Moreover the style

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NOTE: This is the sixth in a series of articles dealing with writers who are less well known here than they deserve to be.

is extraordinary, full of curious mistakes and incorrect slang of which no native American writer would ever be guilty. In every case the German has been published first and it seems likely that Traven Americanized his own books himself.

Certainly in feeling and point of view Traven belongs to the movement which arose in Germany, after the first world war, as an offshoot of expressionism. Along with Bertold Brecht, B. Traven has been considered by German critics to be a representative of the "Epic" school and there is considerable kinship between the two writers. Both are didactic, radical, little interested in individual psychology; both are masters of irony and bitter humor, and both are deliberately brutal. The following song which appears in *Die Baumwollpflücker* (here translated by the writer) even suggests that Traven might have been influenced by Brecht. It was set to music by Hanns Eisler and became very popular in pre-Hitler Germany.

#### COTTONPICKER'S SONG

I dress the merchant in the city,  
The millionaire, the president,  
But I, the wretched cottonpicker,  
I haven't got a single cent.

Trot, trot to the field, be quick, the sun will rise!  
Bag at your waist and tighten up your belt!  
Hear how the scales go screeching, screeching!

Black beans alone, that's what my food is,  
For meat red chile does the trick.  
The bush has gnawed away my shirttail:  
Where cotton grows I have to pick.

And just one hat I have, an old one,  
All full of holes from brim to crown  
And even this I must hold on to  
For when I pick the sun beats down.

I'm full of lice, a dirty bum,  
And that's the way it's got to be  
Because without such scum as I  
There'd be no crop, you see.

Trot, trot, trot, trot to the field, this time the sun  
will rise!  
Pitch out the scales and smash them, smash them!

On the basis of the books themselves, one gathers that Traven left Europe shortly after the first world war. He evidently resided long enough in the United States to acquire considerable knowledge of American life. Thereafter he went to Mexico, the scene of all of his later novels, and has evidently spent much of his time in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco. That he has lived the life of a migratory worker is clear, for only by first hand experience could he have acquired such an intimate knowledge of cotton picking, gold prospecting, mahogany camps, bakeries, oil drilling and cattle raising and doubtless, at some time in his career, he also shipped as a sailor or he could not have written *The Death Ship*. Traven has viewed society from the bottom and what he has seen has filled him with fury and contempt. He has slept in bedbug-ridden flophouses, sweated in the blinding sun, had his wages stolen by unscrupulous contractors, and he has seen the ruthless tentacles of imperialism push further and further into a semi-colonial country. He has also observed at first hand the techniques of a dictatorship and the rot of bureaucratic corruption.

Out of all this has come an apocalyptic attitude. Traven does not paint exploitation in sentimental terms to arouse the pity of the genteel liberal. His books are meant as a bitter lesson to the revolutionarily minded or to those capable of revolution.

Two themes run through all his writing. In *The Death Ship*, for example, with tremendous lyrical intensity he paints the proletarian as the disinherited man. The loss of the sailor's passport has symbolical force. The protagonist is the victim of all governments, an almost classical dramatization of the Communist Manifesto. He is a being without ties of race, family or patriotism: he is stripped of all rights, a non-human, yet living object of exploitation. So the story ends with a veritable descent into the inferno of the doomed death ship. Philosophically, however, this is not the end. In the later books Traven develops his revolutionary theory still further, along with his second theme which is a contrasting of the primitive, agrarian values of Indian Mexico with the hollowness of industrial civilization.



Two short novels, *Die Weisse Rose* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* sketch out ideas which are given more extended treatment in a cycle of six novels. *Die Weisse Rose* is important because it links up American imperialism with conditions in Mexico. It describes an American oil company's method of getting control of an hacienda whose owner, a descendant of Aztec nobility, feels a patriarchal sense of responsibility toward his descendants and the peons who work on his land. A large part of the book is devoted to a Dreiser-like treatment of the president of the oil company—his expensive mistresses, the scandalous manipulations by which he attained power, and the pressures which force him to dispossess the inhabitants of the White Rose Hacienda. The main point of the story is the contrast between the respect for human values shown by the Mexican of Indian stock and the ruthless, impersonal processes set going by the irresponsible oil magnate in Los Angeles. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* succeeds in being both an adventure story and a kind of fable which illustrates the poison of the gold craze. After enduring the tortures of the damned in the mountains, the gold prospectors fight among themselves and are plundered by ignorant bandits who toss the precious gold dust away. The coda to the story points up Traven's criticism of the values of modern society. The old miner, Howard, having cured the chief's son, is urged by the Indians to stay among them as their doctor. Howard answers that he has business to attend to. Says the Cacique, "There is so much business in the world just waiting to be picked up. No use to hurry. . . . All I can offer you is my house and my most sincere hospitality. We have the best game around here. I will see the musicians tomorrow and every Saturday night we will have a dance. . . . There is only one business on earth and that is to live and be happy.' 'I am extremely sorry, Senor, but I can not stay.' Howard had no means with which to explain to these simple men that business is the real thing in life, that is, heaven and paradise and all the happiness of the good Rotarian."

Traven's most ambitious project has been a series of novels, laid in Chiapas and Tabasco, which deal with the Indians of Maya

stock in the period just before and including the overthrow of the Diaz dictatorship. They were published in the following order: *The Carreta, Government* (English translations of these two have appeared in Great Britain), *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba*, *Die Troza*, *Die Rebellion der Gehenkten*, and *Ein General kommt aus dem Dschungel*. The final volume was published by a Dutch firm in 1940. *The Carreta* introduces Andreu Ungaldo, a Zoque Indian, and tells the story of his love for Estrellita whom he rescues from a finquero who is intent on seducing her. In *Government* we meet Don Gabriel Ordunez who starts out as secretary of an independent Indian community and exemplifies the graft and corruption of the Diaz regime. At the end of the book he becomes a labor contractor for the monterias, the mahogany camps, in the Tabascan jungle and the story suddenly shifts to Andreu and describes his parting from Estrellita when he is forced to go to the lumber camps to work out his father's debt. In *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba* Andreu, on the way to the monteria, meets Celso Flores, a Tzotzil Indian when the gang halts at Hucutsin, the last civilized town through which they pass. Much of the book is taken up with the latter's story. Celso had to earn a certain sum of money to win the respect of his prospective father-in-law. But, after several years of slaving, when he was on his way home, at the yearly Candalaria fiesta at Hucutsin, he was carefully tricked into a fight by agents of the monteria. Faced with the alternative of a long jail sentence or a fine, he became Ordunez' victim once more. The march into the terrible tropic jungle now begins. Celso, by this time, knows he will never see his bride again; he can never work out his debt slavery. He contemplates suicide but his will to live is too strong. Nevertheless he considers himself symbolically dead, forever cut off from his home and friends. Here the descent into hell theme is once more taken up by Traven. On the march to the Usamacinta River the overseers increase their cruelty. Celso is no longer a submissive youth, experience has gradually made him tough and defiant. On the trip he contrives to kill two of the overseers and make their death appear accidental. *Die Troza* takes up the story

with the arrival at the monteria. This is one of the least interesting of the series for it is mostly concerned with the details of the mahogany industry and describes the taking over of the camp by the Montellano brothers, the most cruel and greedy bosses in the business. The novel which follows, *Die Rebellion der Gehenkten*, is one of Traven's most dramatic and important works. In the beginning he takes time out to tell the story of Candido Castro who becomes Ordunez' victim when his wife is stricken with appendicitis. The small town doctor refuses to operate without being assured in advance of his fee. The wife dies while negotiations are going on but Candido has already signed up for the monteria and Ordunez makes use of the local police to prevent him from escaping. Candido takes his three motherless children with him to the monteria. His pretty sister, Modesta, decides to follow him. By this time the Montellano brothers, squeezed by their debts and made desperate by rumors that the dictatorship is tottering, are embarking on an orgy of cruelty. In addition to flogging, the punishment of hanging from a tree most of the night, arms and legs trussed up while vicious tropical insects do their work, is used against workers who do not fulfill their impossible logging quotas. Celso, Andreu and Candido now plumb the depths of hell. They are the hanged men, the doomed. Candido grows so desperate that he attempts to escape. Captured, both his ears and those of his young son are cut off. Don Severo, the worst of the three brothers, makes the mistake of going off alone in the bush to flog another native who has attempted to escape. The latter, driven beyond all bounds, overpowers Severo, blinds him, and jumps into the river. Severo shoots himself but his brother, Felix, undaunted by this warning, tries to rape Modesta with whom Celso is already in love. This touches off a spontaneous rebellion. Says Traven, "When the oppressed and persecuted begins to feel that his life has become so like that of a beast that it can not become more so, then the last boundary has been overstepped. A man loses all sense of reason and behaves like a beast in order to regain his status as a human being." This is the crux of Traven's revolutionary philosophy. The proletarian in

the monteria symbolically dies by hanging in order to rise again another sort of being. He must go down to the beast in order to be resurrected as a man. The descent into the hell of exploitation finally toughens the proletarian and the growth of hatred helps him to endure pain. The reborn creature has nothing in common with the submissive individual of the past for he has now become a revolutionary. Thus Traven's approach to revolution does not sidestep the issue of terror. Somewhat as in classic drama, the climactic event is a fearful reversal of fortune and the protagonist only changes his identity when he is completely destroyed. A more precise analogy to Traven's drama is the vegetation myth. By a return to the darkness of the animal, the underworld of death, Euridice, Demeter, Kore is released, the life force is renewed and similarly, Christ by his descent into Hell releases the virtues of antiquity.

Traven does not shrink from describing the most extreme brutality nor does he soften the bloodthirsty revenge taken by the rebel Indians. The overseers and bosses are all killed. Martín, a revolutionary schoolteacher who had escaped from a concentration camp to flee to the monteria, becomes the commissar of the liberated mahogany workers and Méndez, a deserter from the army, becomes their general. These two have already taught Andreu and Celso the slogan "Bread and Freedom." At the same time that the rebels march out of the jungle with Méndez at their head the revolution is beginning to spread throughout the land. The significance of this book is increased by the fact that in it Traven expresses his ideas on government. One of the first things the schoolteacher orders is the burning of all documents, all notes, contracts, even birth certificates and marriage licenses. Why a marriage license, says he? You live with a woman you like and have children by her. Why birth certificates? The fact that you are hungry shows that you have been born. The only function of official papers is to take the earth you have built away from you. Traven underlines the peasant shrewdness and spontaneity of the Indians, pointing out that they know nothing of socialism or communism. "It is always the revolutionary par-



liaments and their meetings which lay waste a revolution and finally ruin it." Traven's own anarchistic individualism is clearly demonstrated in the following blast against systems of government: "Whenever a group of petty demagogues is master of enough brutality and persuasive power to force all other men into a system, it is always the individual who is overpowered. It does not matter what the system is called. Whether any system is harmful or useful to a people does not depend upon the system. . . . It depends upon the individual in what manner one system or another is realized, for no system of government is good or bad. And, regardless of what the propagandists of one system or another may preach, there is no system that can also make a quarter of mankind, against which it will be used, happy and contented." Traven, therefore, although he accepts the Marxist criticism of capitalism, commits himself to no established theory of government. This is further borne out by the last book in the cycle, which recounts the triumphs of the revolutionary band as they overcome the Federal soldiers and distribute the land to the peons. Except for one scene in which the government general is captured, stripped of his uniform and humiliated until he commits suicide, the book lacks three dimensions. It is as if he had exhausted himself in creating the wild orgy of rebellion in the previous book, the climax toward which all of his work had been building. The end of any dictatorship brings about chaos which sets back human progress a hundred years, is Traven's final comment, and the story ends inconclusively with the confusion of rival factions that sprang up after the fall of Diaz. Perhaps Traven intends to continue the series. The absence of positive program, however, is characteristic of his whole philosophy. The Indians want to be left alone. They want to cultivate the maize and continue their traditional existence. In a sense this is also Traven's deepest impulse.

Technically Traven is a curiously careless writer. *Die Baumwollpflücker* is scarcely a novel at all but rather a string of picaresque episodes in the life of a migrant worker. *The Death Ship* follows the same pattern. He is always ready to digress and tell

some story which illustrates his theme. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* has several of these long asides. He is also forever stopping to embark on long tirades—jeers, maledictions, or ironical explanations of the workings of capitalism. Some of these passages, as in *The Death Ship*, are lyrically eloquent and highly effective. At other times they are heavy-handed and repetitive. In the mahogany cycle there are pages and pages of mere exposition of how the industry works and very often one set of characters is dropped for half a volume while the author suddenly concentrates on a new group. The end of a volume seldom coincides with a climax or resolution. Often the reader does not know where he is heading until he picks up the next. Yet, when Traven is not explaining or scolding, he can write memorable scenes of Indian life. Andreu's parting from Estrellita has genuine pathos and the scene between the advocate and the owner of the hacienda in *Die Weisse Rose* is as full of peasant shrewdness and humor as anything written by Silone. Likewise the scenes of exploitation and brutality are vividly terrifying. Altogether the mahogany series is a monumental study of the workings of imperialism in a semi-colonial country and a bitter comment on dictatorship. He sums up his contempt for the latter as follows: "It is really much easier to give orders than to rule. That is why all dictators are such bad rulers. . . . Even an idiot can dictate."

As was said above, Traven shares the wish of the Indians to be let alone. And this leads to the ultimate development of his second major theme. The Indians of Mexico are among the most honorable, dignified and hard-working people in Latin America or, for that matter, anywhere in the world. In many parts of the country they have clung to their communal way of life and still maintain their own form of government. It is only recently that the Mexican government has been successful in teaching the Spanish language to the Chiapas tribes. The writer, when he visited Chiapas in 1945, was much impressed by the self-sufficiency of these small farmers and sheep herders. For such Indians B. Traven has the utmost sympathy and respect. In *Die Weisse Rose*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and all through the

mahogany cycle there are passages in praise of the practicality and good sense of their way of life. It is in the *Bridge in the Jungle*, however, that Traven really unburdens himself and at the same time creates his most perfect work of art. There is a truly classical unity in this story of the death and funeral of an Indian boy in a remote jungle village of southern Mexico. With slow, casual piling up of detail, Traven creates the scene by the river at the pump station and the ever tightening mood of vague suspense as the villagers await the musicians who are supposed to play for a dance. In the lush, damp darkness the sense of hovering tragedy gradually develops, the anguish of the mother deepens, the hunt for the lost boy grows more and more desperate and finally the conjure-light guides the searchers to the corpse in the river. With subtle touches Traven paints the instinctive fellowship and love that exists between these primitive people. As if bound by a network of nerves, the whole community searches for the child and to the funeral come neighbors from miles around. The simple gestures of love and sympathy, the pathetic dressing up of the corpse in colored paper and crown, the unashamed drunkenness, the profound resignation to death—all are contrasted with the vomit of American industrial civilization which has penetrated even to this remote outpost—cheap machine-made dresses which distort the natural beauty of the women's bodies, the sailor suit on the dead child, and finally the musicians playing "It ain't gonna rain no more" on the way to the funeral. This last ironic touch helps to heighten the beautiful ingenuousness of the Indians who take the cheap tune and use it for their magnificently inappropriate purpose. Traven sweeps on to the end of the book with one of his bitter choruses in which he lashes out at industrial civilization. "On this trail, blazed by our dance songs, there would soon arrive Fords, vacuum cleaners, electric refrigerators, air-conditioned grass huts, windmill-driven television, canned alligator pears and the pulverized hearts of palm trees . . ."

It is with simple human values, an eternally wise acceptance of fundamentals, that this book is concerned. Atmospheric, me-

ticulously real, often profoundly tender, it is a poem about death. Here Traven does not write from a doctrinaire class angle, he affirms delicate emotional values and at the same time indicts the future of the world, for the world is rapidly moving away from everything these simple, yet not so simple, Indians stand for. In this, his greatest book, Traven shows clearly that he is not a revolutionary who will be content with mere equidistribution in a mass production utopia.

Traven is preoccupied with the dignity of man in the modern world. The sharpening of the political and economic crisis has tended to obscure the menace of mass production civilization whether capitalist or socialist. The pressure of the struggle has tended to dissipate cultural values and those who fight hardest for the rights of the exploited often confuse the means with the end. Thus it is that all values begin to be reduced to the lowest pragmatic level and a dangerous indifference to all idealism of the past begins to set in. Traven's importance stems from his insight into the central problem of our age. All that degrades the human spirit he hates whether it be physical oppression or cheapening of taste and feeling. In all of his books he shows a profound admiration for the lack of acquisitiveness of the Latin American Indian. And indeed it is in such colonial countries that non-industrial values make their last stand against the poverty of spirit of the politico-economic age. In rebelling against the latter, Traven has accepted the need for economic revolution, but it is also noteworthy that he, himself, has fled, like a prose Rimbaud, to the green indifference of the tropics and the resigned tranquility of the still primitive and traditionally communistic Indian.



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